MUSCLE SHOALS MUSIC NOW

The best way to understand the music scene in the Shoals is to know that it's underpinned by three key characteristics that are linked to the music legacy of the town as well as the current crop of musicians and songwriters. The first of these is the fierce and determined authenticity of both the songwriting and musicianship of artists. In a small town that celebrates individuality, there's no room for blatant or even covert imitation, considered anathema to the ongoing music legacy of the Shoals. Every songwriter in town is telling *their* story from *their* perspective, and the outcomes - both in terms of releases and live music performances - are remarkably distinct and unique as a result.

The authenticity in Gary Nichols' songs reflect the highs as well as the lows of his journey, and his determination to live a better life. From lead singer and key songwriter in The Steeldrivers when Chris Stapleton departed in 2010, Nichols' contribution to the band helped them win a Grammy for Best Bluegrass Album in 2015. However, this highpoint contrasts with the lows that Nichols subsequently experienced due to the destructive habits that nearly cost him his career and possibly his life. Nichols' recent single *This Time Around* shares his passionate message of recovery for those locked into drug and alcohol abuse. Nichol's blues-infused music and raw, gravelly voice elevates the song in an authentically distinctive way.

Similarly, Shoals native **Taylor Grace** does not hold back in revealing her innermost anxieties and innate understanding of the human condition in songs like *To Hell With Guys*, *Balance* and *Familiar*. Taylor's voice, which has a wispy vulnerability reminiscent of Claudine Longet (especially her performance of *Nothing To Lose* from Peter Sellers' film *The Party*), perfectly suits the introspective and revealing nature of her songs. Her regular co-writers, James LeBlanc, Angela Hacker and Mark Narmore, no doubt help Taylor draw on her experiences while ensuring that the emotions expressed in her songwriting appeal to a broad audience.

Another key characteristic of the Shoals music scene is cross-generational collaboration, and it is so prevalent that I challenge the reader to nominate another music industry town where music is both written and performed across a large range of different generations, often featuring intermingled music genres. In the Shoals, this type of collaboration sees experienced musicians, songwriters and Grammy-winners collaborating with much younger and less experienced musicians and songwriters. It is this type of collaboration that takes songs written by emerging musicians and songwriters and elevates them to a whole new level. The generosity of this type of collaboration neatly reflects the town's dictum of 'community over competition'.

A recent example is The Band Loula, a Georgia-based duo who record their music at Ivy Manor in the Shoals. Comprised of Malachi Mills and Logan Simmons, the duo initially emerged with a country/folk sound that underpinned their outstanding vocal harmonies. However, with the contributions of Grammy-winners Gary Nichols and Jimbo Hart as well as Shoals session drummer Evan Lane and touring/session bass-player Jamie McFarlane, The Band Loula's recorded sound as well as live performances now have a richer, blues/bluegrass sound that enhances the powerful gospel vocal harmonies of the duo.

A similar story can be found in the music and performances of Australian musician Lucie Tiger who recently moved to the Shoals. A competent songwriter, Lucie's music comes to life exactly as she envisions with input of Bob Wray (who's recorded with Johnny Cash, Roy Orbison, Willie Nelson, Chuck Berry, BB King and toured with The Highwaymen), Will McFarlane (Shoals session guitarist who toured with Bonnie Raitt 1974-1980), Justin Holder (#1 Shoals session drummer), and the supremely talented keys player Brad Kuhn. Half of the musicians are Lucie's age and the other, a generation older and it is this mix of generations that helps Lucie to forge her own brand of southern rock that deftly melds the current sounds of Miranda Lambert with 1970s Lynyrd Skynyrd.

Another key characteristic of the Shoals music scene is the focus on current music with a respectful nod to the past. It's impossible to live in the Shoals without bumping into ghosts from the past like the original batch of Swampers plus musicians and songwriters like Donnie Fritts and W.C. Handy as well as producers like Rick Hall and Sam Phillips. It is likely that the achievements of legendary figures such as these help to propel the careers of current musicians and songwriters to aim high.

In a new development, the legendary La Fonda Jam Sessions are back in the Shoals. In its heyday, the La Fonda Jam occurred at a Mexican restaurant just east of downtown Florence on Highway 72. While it may have been an unlikely venue, it housed jam sessions for a decade and these featured the Iguana Party band, Jason Isbell and many other Shoals area artists. Reigniting this tradition, the first session featured some cool local musicians including Jimbo Hart, Barry Billings, Derek Coffman, Weston Harris Hill, Jay Burgess and Kevin Duane Reed. The Shoals is keen to have legendary La Fonda Jam Sessions back and they'll be held each month at the Lava Room.

A weekly show that is not to be missed in the Shoals is *Fathers & Sons* at FloBama. A cross-generational band that has been playing for more than ten years, it features some of the best musicians in the Shoals and, because they've been playing together so long, the chemistry between them is to be seen to be believed. Will McFarlane is joined on stage by Kelvin Holly, who was the long-time guitarist and band leader for Little Richard plus played with the Amazing Rhythm Aces and Pegi Young among others. To hear the two guitarists trade riffs every Tuesday night in the Shoals is an absolute joy. The rhythm section is Will's son Jamie McFarlane, who is considered one of the top bass guitar session musicians in town, and probably the #1 session drummer in the Shoals, Justin Holder. Noble C Thurman, who adds keys, played with Holly's band The Decoys back in the 1990s and has

The Band Loula. Photo by Zena O'Connor.

a stellar career as a songwriter, often collaborating with Scott Boyer of The Decoys as well as Shoals legends Donnie Fritts and Spooner Oldham.

Links with the legendary figures of the past are a huge and inevitable part of the music scene in the Shoals. However, the fierce authenticity of current musicians, songwriters and producers in the town as well as their determination to make music on their own terms propels them to great heights on their creative journeys. It is likely that the Grammy quota for the Shoals is higher than most towns and will continue to grow due to the calibre of the music output of the Shoals now.

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